



# PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

## SOUTHCENTRAL REGION

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### News Release

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**For Immediate Release**

#### **FRANKLIN COUNTY POACHING RING APPREHENDED**

Criminal charges were filed this week against six Franklin County individuals in connection with a poaching spree that spanned six months. This past fall and winter, the individuals are alleged to have shot well over 100 deer, most left to rot at the location of kill, in what officials are classifying as a complete disregard for our wildlife resources.

Hunter Atherton (20), Abigale Hoover (20), and Caillou Patterson (20), all of Greencastle, were charged by State Game Warden Philp Bietsch for their involvement in a poaching spree that spanned the months of August 2022 to January 2023. Three juveniles were also charged in connection with these alleged crimes and face many of the same charges.

Beginning in September, reports from the public began reaching the Pennsylvania Game Commission through its central dispatch center and Operation Game Thief (OGT) lines. The reports indicated many people were finding dead deer, apparently shot, in their front yards and fields in the Southern Franklin County area.

In one report, a resident in the Mercersburg area witnessed the occupants of a vehicle spotlighting after legal hours. The witness saw the vehicle stop on the roadway as the occupants cast the rays of the spotlight onto a group of deer in the field. A gunshot rang out and immediately afterward, the deer in the spotlight dropped to the ground and laid motionless. Although the witness was unable to gather a license plate number, they provided a good description of the vehicle, which proved very valuable months later.

Although State Game Wardens devoted many hours to working nighttime patrols and operations in the areas where the poaching activities occurred, they were unsuccessful in apprehending those responsible. That is until Jan. 3, 2023, when Warden Bietsch caught the break he worked so hard to get.

At about midnight while patrolling in Washington Township, the core area of the poaching activity, a vehicle parked at a local gas station caught Warden Bietsch's eye. It matched the eyewitness description given in September.

Warden Bietsch hurried to a spot along a length of roadway where numerous deer were killed over the past few months. After a short wait at a spot where he could remain out of sight

but still see, Warden Bietsch heard multiple gunshots pierce the silence of the cold night. Shortly afterwards, a slowly traveling vehicle emerged on the roadway: the same one seen at the gas station. Its occupants were operating a spotlight.

Warden Bietsch stopped the vehicle and found one adult and two juveniles in possession of a loaded .22 Magnum caliber rifle. The suspects admitted shooting at three separate deer, just as Warden Bietsch heard. Follow-up interviews implicated three other individuals, two adults and one juvenile, in the poaching spree on previous nights. In total the group estimated they shot between 100-200 deer “just for fun.” Although these numbers cannot be substantiated, Warden Bietsch was able to definitively recover or gather evidence of 26 unlawfully killed deer and confirmed an additional 7 “attempts,” where the shooter either missed the deer or the deer could not be located after being shot.

This killing spree spanned the entire southern tier of Franklin County, from Waynesboro into Little Cove, and ended only because of the involvement of concerned citizens and the hard work and persistence of Warden Bietsch.

The six individuals face a combined total of 113 counts of the unlawful taking or killing of game or wildlife, 207 counts of the unlawful use of lights while hunting, 42 counts of the possession of loaded firearms in a vehicle, 62 counts of restrictions on recreational spotlighting, and 62 counts of the unlawful use of a vehicle to locate game or wildlife. Atherton, Hoover, and Patterson also face corruption of minors charges. Additionally, Atherton was charged with recklessly endangering the welfare of others.

Those charges range from felonies to misdemeanors to summary violations, with the most serious potentially carrying fines and penalties of up to \$15,000 and 36 months in prison. Additionally, the charges carry wildlife replacement costs of just shy of \$21,000. The witness in this case, meanwhile, may be awarded a \$500 reward for their crucial role in helping to bring this case to a close.

Anyone with information about wildlife crimes can report them to the Game Commission via its toll-free Operation Game Thief hotline- 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year- at 1-888-PGC-8001 or fill out an online form at <https://pgcdatacollection.pa.gov/operationgamethief>. Callers may remain confidential and may be eligible for monetary rewards.